Tracer
The McHenry County Historical Society's Quarterly Magazine
ENJOYED BY OUR MEMBERS FOR 50 YEARS
VOLUME 1 WINTER 2021

Bill Talidis, owner of the Pink Barn in Union, shows off a handcrafted mink coat back in 1991. Talidis, who died in November, hailed from a region is Greece renown for its natural fur garment makers.

Fur industry important part of McHenry County's history

By CRAIG L. PFANNKUCHE

It might be surprising to McHenry County residents to know that, at one time, McHenry County was especially well known across the United States for the sale of a wide variety of furs, as well as the manufacture of fur garments.

When reflecting upon the fur trade, many think of French fur trappers searching for beaver in the late 1700s. However, there is much more to the story than that.

Certainly, beaver was common in the Fox and Kishwaukee River valleys, as well as along the Nippersink and Piscasaw creeks. By 1816, a trading "factory" was set up near the mouth of the Chicago River where the area's Amerindians could trade beaver, fox and muskrat pelts (hides) for supplies.

Editor's note: As distasteful as many people may find the fur trade now, it was an important part of McHenry County's history – and its economy. It also is significant to note that not all commercially raised, fur-bearing animals farmed in the county were turned into coats and hats. The internationally renown Northwestern Rabbitry operated in Woodstock around the turn of the century until it was destroyed by fire in April 1902. It's owner, Edith Kingman Poyer, catered to pet owners and breeders – importing hundreds of Belgian hares and cavies from England. Northwestern Rabbitry boasted some 300 rabbits at one time, the best examples of which Poyer brought to various exhibitions around the country.

The May 23, 1901 edition of the Woodstock Sentinel notes: "...The Sunday New York Herald of May 19 declares Mrs. Poyer to be a woman of enterprise, who, with a little capital and indefatigable work, has made a phenomenal success in the pet stock industry, and has opened the way for many women and men with small means to gain not only a livelihood, but a competency."

Continued on page 7

The Tracer is a quarterly publication carrying local history topics, news and information for members of the McHenry County Historical Society.

Our museum is located between Routes 20 and 176, at 6422 Main Street in Union, Illinois

MAILING ADDRESS:

P.O. Box 434, Union, IL 60180

PHONE:

815-923-2267

EMAIL:

info@mchenrycountyhistory.org

WEBSITE:

www.GotHistory.org

MCHS STAFF:

Board President .....Karen Parks
Adminstrator .....Kurt Begalka
Office Manager .....Nancy Roozee
Volunteer & Outreach Coordinator....Karolina Kowalczyk
Exhibits Curator ..... Kira Stell
Tracer Designer.....Nancy Humphrey Haskins

OFFICE & RESEARCH LIBRARY HOURS:

Monday through Friday - 9:00 AM to 4:30 PM

An appointment is necessary to use the research library. Non-members pay a research fee. Copies are extra.

MUSEUM HOURS:

The museum hopes to reopen, in limited fashion, this summer. Research requests: Call for appointment availability.

McHenry County Historical Society members enjoy FREE admission.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT:

We engage and educate current and future generations by preserving and sharing McHenry County history.

(An Illinois Not-for-profit 501c3 Corporation)

We Appreciate Our Members!

President's Column

Hanging with history

While social distancing, I look to the Historical Society's offerings to keep me entertained and safe inside. As I think back on the past year and reflect on all that has happened, I also can see the many changes – both good and bad – that have occurred at the museum.

Obviously, our attendance has been way down. However, we have started new ways to bring our mission – to engage and educate current and future generations by preserving and sharing McHenry County's history – to our members and others throughout the county.

We had to suspend some programs, such as most of last year's Sampler lecture series, the Perkins' Players historical re-enactment and our annual Historic Halloween. But we were able to host a modified Heritage Fair and Cider Fest, although in a somewhat slimmed-down fashion because of public health requirements.

Our education program stepped up with history kits for parents and others to pick up and do at home, as well as several, well-produced videos available on our website.

We sold the Schuette building, which lacked the environmental controls necessary for safely storing our collection, and consolidated satellite storage into one, larger location. Time marches on and the historical objects that reflect those seminal moments need to be collected, recorded and ... yes ... stored for future generations! A board task force produced a request for proposals (RFP) for a thorough space analysis. The subsequent report should help us make informed decisions on facilities and storage in the future.

Karen Parks

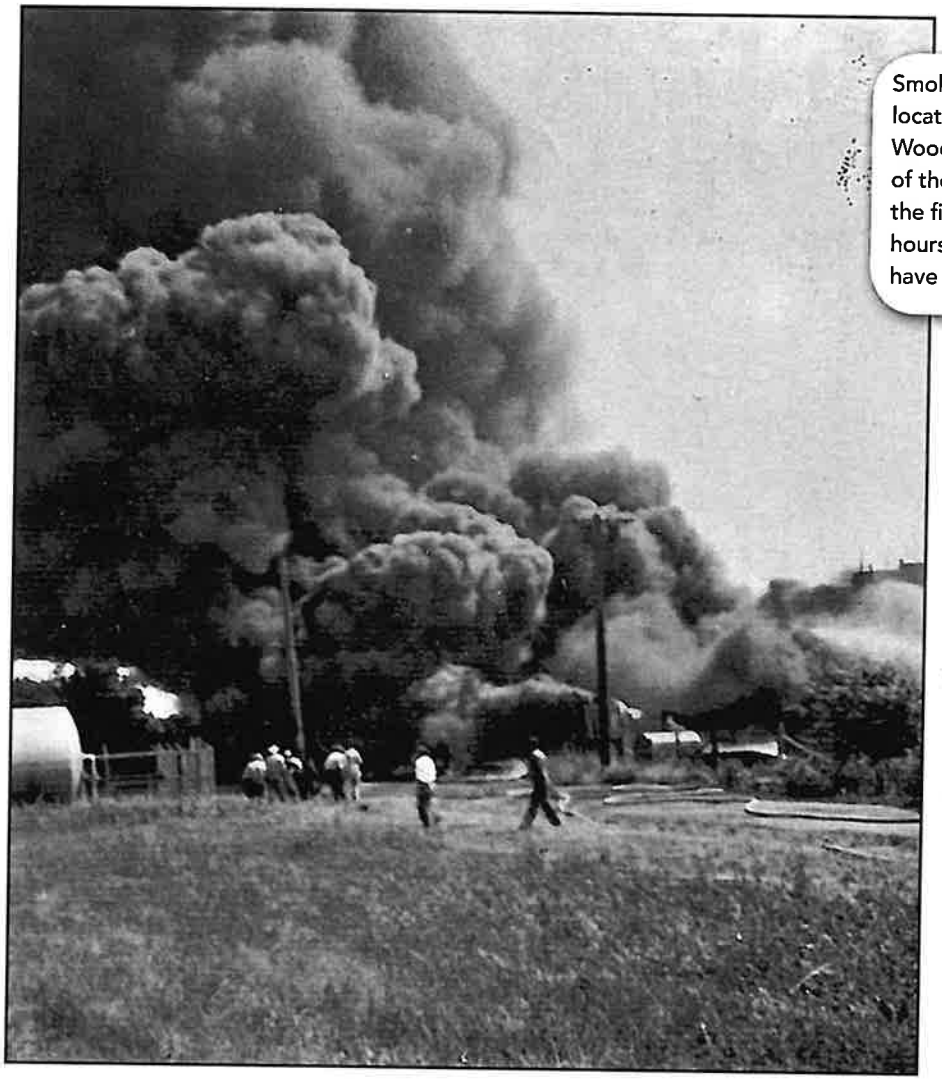
The pandemic has changed so much about how we live and will impact much of how life unfolds. I am looking forward to getting membership and attendance back up – even exceeding previous years. I appeal to you, our valued members and friends, to spread the word about what the McHenry County Historical Society offers. Following a return to normalcy (or what passes for that nowadays) invite them to join you for a program or an exhibit opening. We are confident that they, too, will see the value of becoming a supporting member.

Exhibits Curator Kira Stell is organizing the Anderson Gallery to showcase restored, local art from the Society's collection in time for a spring opening. In time, we intend to bring back all of the programs you enjoy and appreciate to pre-pandemic formats, in addition to continuing more online and outreach activities.

Having completed the first edition of the museum self-assessment program (StEPs), offered by the American Association of State and Local History, the board will decide if it wishes to tackle the second edition. We also will be revisiting and updating our strategic plan.

Finally, I would like to thank the dedicated staff, board, volunteers, members and donors for getting us through a difficult and different kind of year. I appreciate your continued support of the Society through membership and contributions. We are resolved to continually move forward – ever mindful of our mission and our vision: to be a hub for collection, preservation and educational outreach reflecting McHenry County's history.

~ Gratefully yours, Karen Parks



Smoke billows up from the Home Oil warehouse, located along Amsterdam Street near the Woodstock Square. Through the combined efforts of the Woodstock city and rural fire departments, the fire was pretty much extinguished in two hours; a relatively uneventful end to what could have been a catastrophic event.

An explosion rocks Woodstock

By LARRY TAYLOR

The morning of July 6, 1944, was sunny and warm. Jim Taylor, who had spent many years delivering fuel for Home Oil Co., just returned from his first round of deliveries.

Most area homes and businesses were heated either by coal or home heating oil. Farmers also counted on Jim and Home Oil to keep them supplied with gasoline for equipment and fuel oil for their homes.

Jim was well known in the Woodstock area for his good service and friendly nature. Many looked forward to the latest news when Jim's truck pulled into their driveways.

Jim loved his customers, but this was not easy work. At that time fuel oils and gasoline were not dispensed though a hose to customers tanks, but rather carried by hand in 5-gallon buckets. A deliveryman would carry a bucket in each hand from the truck to customers' tanks – often located in difficult locations. Many trips were necessary to fill the required orders.

Buckets, transported on the ledge of the truck, boasted a measurement gauge and handle on the top (as shown on page 4). Each time Jim left with these buckets of fuel, he would keep track of how many gallons were dispensed by moving a ring from one peg to another on the metal chart built into the back door of the tank assembly.

Jim stopped at the Home Oil service station, at 125 N. Throop St. He checked the spindle for new orders, which had been phoned in, and planned his next run. His truck tank was divided internally into three compartments allowing 600 gallons of gasoline and different weights of fuel oil to be hauled together. Home Oil's warehouse, where he filled up, was located on Amsterdam Street next to the railroad siding. Several large tanks holding a bulk supply of fuels were on site, and additional inventory had just been received by railroad tank car.

The warehouse had just received gasoline and it was completely stocked with fuel and lubricating oil, as well as kerosene. Three bulk storage tanks were full.

Jim pulled his truck into the warehouse and stopped. With the aid of a short ramp he hand loaded a 50-gallon barrel of kerosene into a side compartment of his truck (no easy task). After advancing to the loading platform, he began filling his tank compartments with fuel.

Everything seemed normal. It was only after Jim started his truck to back out of the warehouse, did catastrophe strike: an explosion that engulfed the warehouse in fire!

Jim realized his only chance to escape was to run though the doorway, already a sheet of flames, and likely catch fire himself. Once outside, he had the presence of mind to roll on the ground and extinguish his burning clothes.

Jim Taylor's clothing was burned off and he was badly injured, but nevertheless reached Washington Street (then

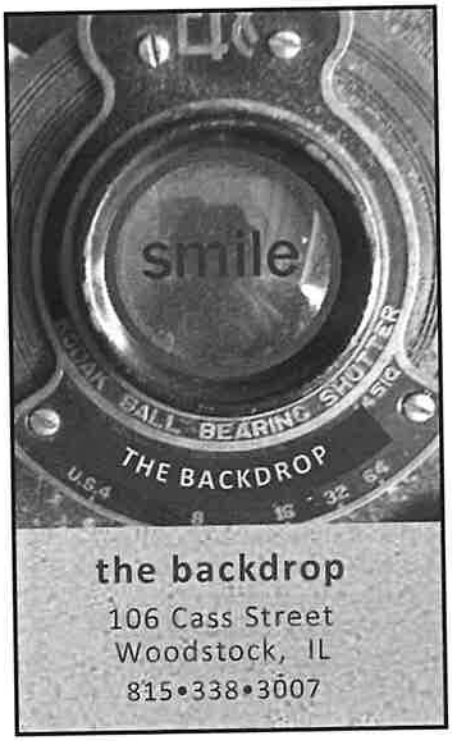
Continued on page 4

Continued from page 3

Home Oil Co., at 125 Throop St., served a vital role by delivering heating oil throughout the Woodstock area. Jim Taylor's truck is parked in front.

Route 14). After several cars passed him by, a motorist picked him up and instructed him to ride on the running board as they headed for the Woodstock Hospital.

So terrific was the explosion that it was heard throughout the city. Workmen in a nearby war plant, the Metal Products Co., were nearly knocked to their knees.



"So terrific was the explosion that it was heard throughout the city," the *Daily Sentinel* reported. "Huge columns of smoke went skyward and mixed with the flames of the burning oil. It could be seen for miles."

As fire trucks arrived, huge columns of smoke and flames shot skyward. The wind was blowing the flames away from the large storage tanks. However, there was a major concern that outside storage tanks would explode from the heat. Adding to the urgency were nearby fuel storage tanks and warehouses belonging to the Goodall Oil Co. and McHenry County Farm Bureau.

Just north of the Home Oil storage tanks were the Western Gas reserve tanks. Adding to the intensity of the fire, were drums containing kerosene, oil and lubricants stored in the warehouse and an adjacent building.

Everything was on fire, and there were homes located nearby. Woodstock police kept gawkers a block away for their own safety.

Firemen were forced back repeatedly by explosions which sent flames high into the air. The flames' proximity to the Chicago & North Western Railroad tracks caused an outbound train from Chicago to held up for more than two hours. There were ongoing concerns that aforementioned storage tanks could explode at any moment.

Nevertheless, the Woodstock Fire Department succeeded in getting the fire under control and extinguished by 12:30 p.m. Chief Clare Floyd had nothing but praise for the hard work of his men, who poured on water using four hoses. Nevertheless, damage was estimated at $20,000 – a lot of money considering a new house fetched less than $4,000 at the time.

The fueling station was rebuilt, this time outdoors. Jim Taylor continued to deliver fuel for Home Oil and later, became an agent, before retiring in 1972, after 41 years.

Continued on page 5

Continued from page 4

Jim Taylor is pictured behind the wheel of his fuel truck in the early '40s. Note the Elks' lodge (now Ethereal Confections at 140 Cass St.) pictured in the background.

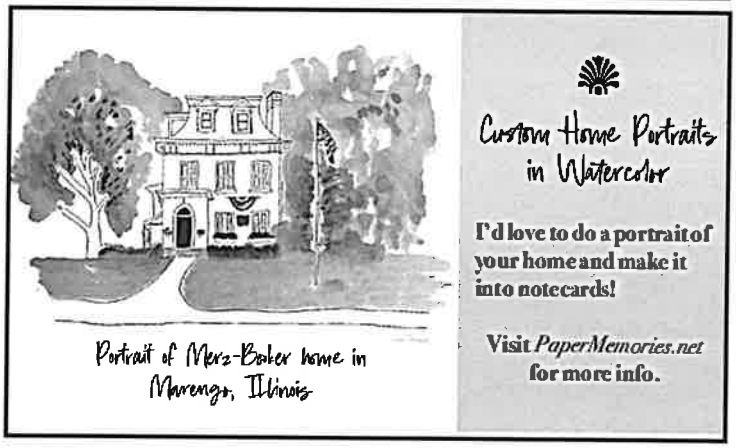
Jim figured his truck either backfired or the starter could have sparked, causing the gasoline fumes to ignite. However, State Fire Marshal John L. Fenn complained at the time that improperly refined fuel oil, shipped by a few "fly by night" producers posed a significant hazard. It seemed its volatile flash point, the temperature at which fuel oil vapor will explode when ignited, was far lower than usual.

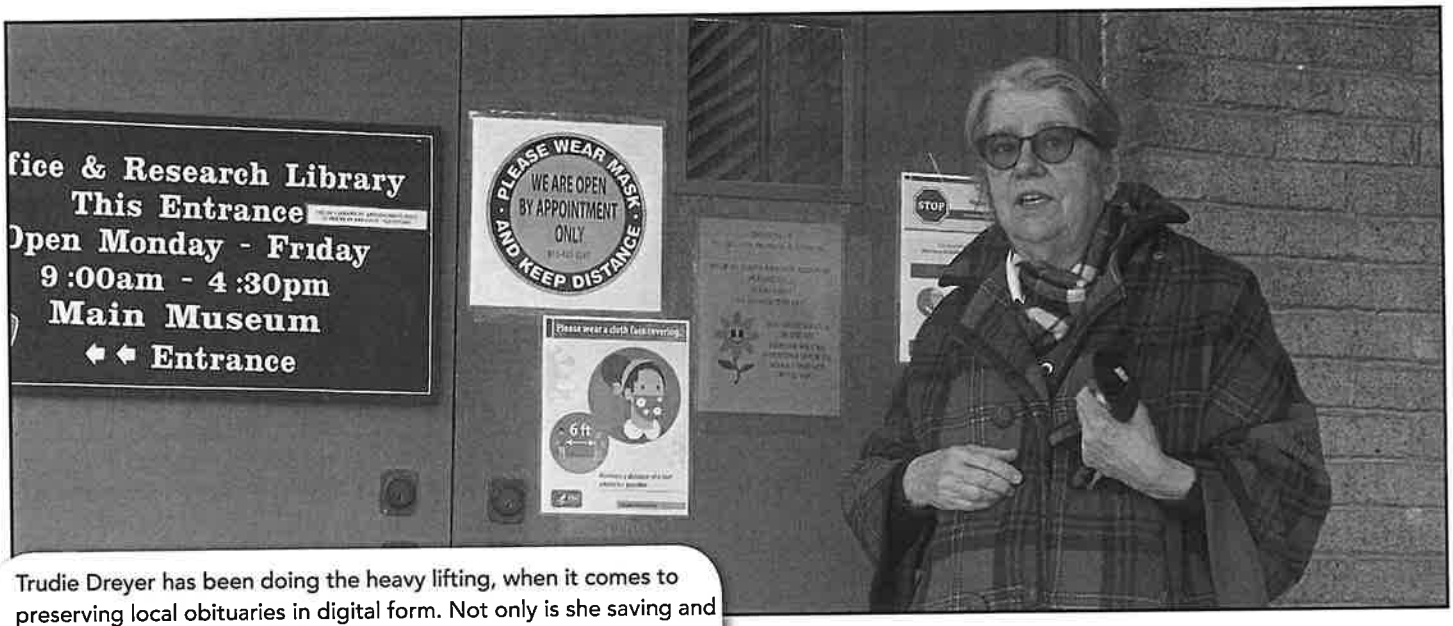
Jim survived, but he was badly burned about his face and hands. Upon his release from the hospital, the scar tissue on his hands was so tight he could not make a fist ... until he went on a fall fishing trip to Wisconsin.

He was on a lake when a thunderstorm suddenly boiled up. As Jim rowed for all he was worth, toward shore and shelter, the skin on his hands broke open and bled. After the skin healed, his grip was better than ever. At least, that's the way I heard it ... from Jim Taylor, my dad. ◆

Iron Horse Estate Sales
Antiques & Appraisers
130+Years of Combined Experience
Serving McHenry County for 4 Decades
Call for Free Consultation
815.575.1720 Estate Sales: Stacy McArdle
815.575.1272 Antiques & Appraisals: Debbie & Jim McArdle

You gotta make some noise!℠
• Strategic Marketing Plans
• Media Management
• Public Relations
• Graphic Design & Print Production
• Radio, TV & Print Campaigns
Dobbe Marketing & PR, Inc.
104 Minnie Street Crystal Lake, IL 60014
815.459.5447 815.788.8318 Fax dobbemarketing.com


Portrait of Merz-Baker home in Marengo, Illinois
Custom Home Portraits in Watercolor
I'd love to do a portrait of your home and make it into notecards!
Visit PaperMemories.net for more info.



Trudie Dreyer has been doing the heavy lifting, when it comes to preserving local obituaries in digital form. Not only is she saving and logging current deaths, she has been digitizing obituaries from previous years in an effort to improve searchability and to save sorely needed space in the Research Library.

Lifelong learner getting schooled by history

TRACER: How long have you been a volunteer with the McHenry County Historical Society?
DREYER: A little over a year.

TRACER: What prompted you to choose this organization?
DREYER: History is something we cannot afford to lose. We would have lost a truckload of history if not for people at the historical society. The stuff that would have been lost is getting saved. That is what Kira (Stell) does. She literally saves and categorizes stuff so that people can see how things were.

TRACER: What sort of things do you do here?
DREYER: I upload digital obituaries, answer reference questions, and plod through cemeteries. I have been giving cemetery tours 10 years, ever since I inherited a Civil War soldier database from (local historian) Don Purn. I'm still slogging through the Mt. Thabor Cemetery and still bumping into things that I find out. ... Every answer I get I have two more questions.

TRACER: What is the best part of volunteering at the museum?

Trudie Dreyer prides herself on being independent, perpetually curious and liberal minded.

"You might as well call me a communist," she joked.

Trudie still abhors the thinking that enabled her high school's nickname – the "Chinks" – to endure until 1980 in Pekin, Ill. (It came from the mistaken belief that the town lay opposite Peking, China on the globe.)

An Italian people person, Trudie has always had a keen sense of what others are feeling. Perhaps that is what drew her to volunteer at Turning Point in 1990, where she now advocates for women victimized by domestic violence. It a reason why she and her husband of 38 years, Dave, host disabled adults from Sheltered Village who wish to visit the couple's backyard garden railroad. She also serves on the theater advisory committee of the Huntley Park District and sews costumes for various stage plays around the county.

"I'm the worst actress in the world," she said laughing. "I'm better at stage managing, working backstage."

She prides herself on making a difference – be it in a library, where she worked for more than 30 years – or as a research library volunteer and researcher for the McHenry County Historical Society.

"My bucket list is really unending," Trudie said. "I enjoy going to national parks and hiking all over the place. I'm learning French right now through the Woodstock Public Library. ... I'm always delving into something. I appreciate people who know more than I do so I can learn from them."

~ Kurt Begalka

DREYER: I love historical snooping. You may be dead, but I can still find stuff about you. It's like honoring them to me. ... I want to know their stories. I want to know their lives. And I don't' see people's stories going away. What I think has happened because of social media is that stories are embellished and broadened to the point that you get

Continued on page 7

Continued from page 1

"During the 1840s, McHenry County gave $15 for the skin of every wolf over 6 months of age killed within the county. People from all over the region began bringing live wolves into the county so they could meet the bounty requirements and collect the money. One enterprising citizen of Nunda Township constructed cages in which he placed pups and raised them until they reached maturity and were redeemable for maximum value. A writer in 1885 said 'This came pretty near raising wolves for the market.'"

- History of McHenry County 1885

Otto Grosse, owner of Northwood Fur Farm, operated one of the nation's largest mink ranches in the late '50s – begun in 1936 on what is now the Foxford Hills Golf Club along Rawson Bridge Road in Cary. The barn housed the company's offices and apartments for employees.

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 6

overwhelmed with information. I do not envy the people who will come after me who will try to make sense of it.

TRACER: What do you do for a living? (If retired, explain your former occupation)
DREYER:: I'm a retired school librarian and I've had too many jobs to list. I worked seven years as a school librarian for Woodstock District 200 and then for Crystal Lake Central High School in District 155. I then got a job with the Woodstock Public Library in 1990 where I worked until 2019. There was a good vibe going on there. With rare exceptions, we would jump through hoops to help people.

TRACER: How did you get to where you are today?

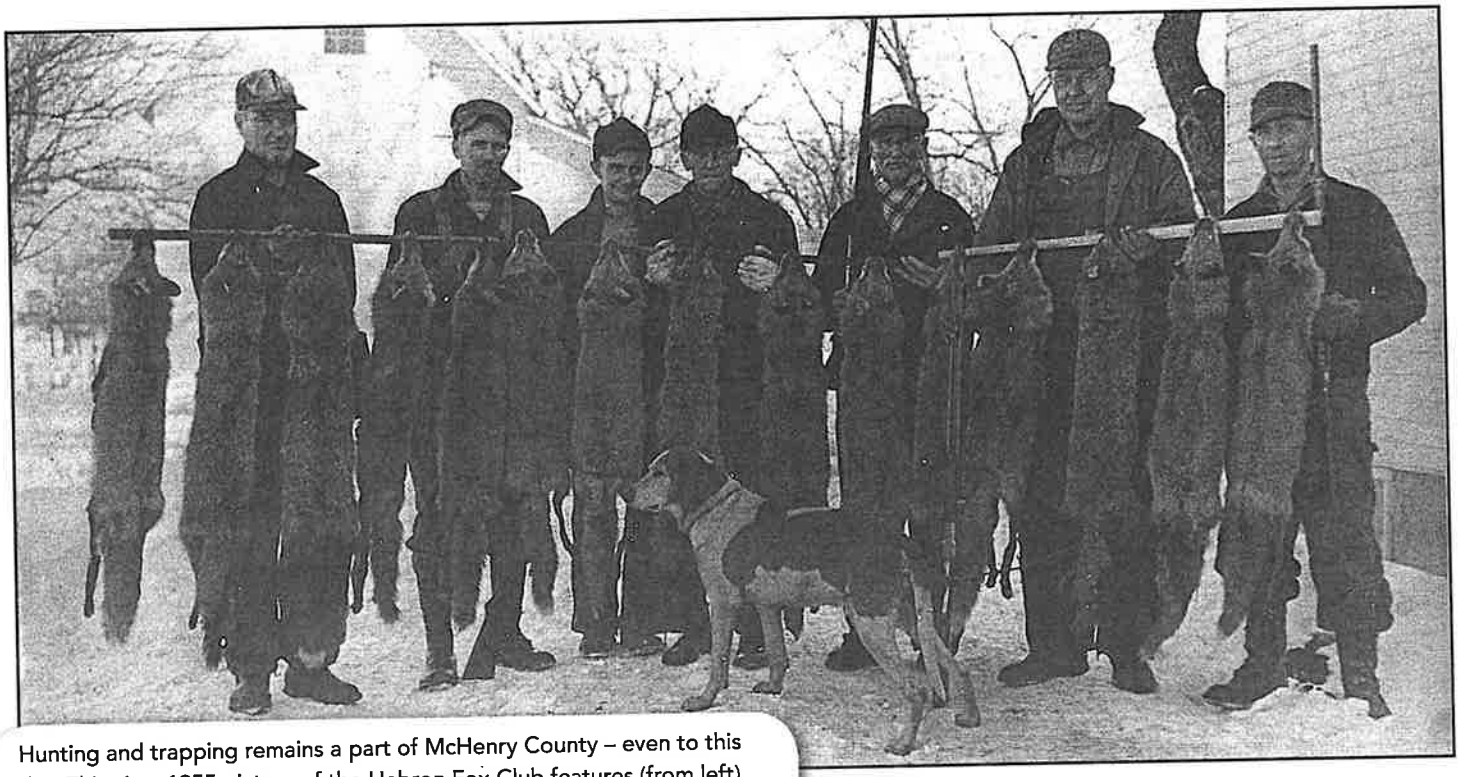
DREYER: Simple hard work, networking, and a lot of luck.

TRACER: Do you have a mentor? If so, who, and describe how he/she influenced you.
DREYER: I am a lifelong learner which means that I have had, and hope to continue with, a truckload of mentors. My husband, Dave, is a great mentor.

TRACER: Do you have a favorite memory of a great day at the Historical Society? Favorite day at Historical Society?
DREYER: So far, that day is when Bob Frenz showed me the journal kept by John Brink, with George Bunker, on their way to Stones River battlefield in Tennessee. ◆

NAME: Trudie Dreyer
AGE: 79
TOWN WHERE I LIVE NOW: Woodstock
HOMETOWN: Pekin
FAMILY (spouse/children): Husband, Dave; four children: Richard, 55, of Dallas; Erik, 49, of Chicago; Karl, 44, of Boston; and Katie, 35, of Chicago. All are teachers or involved in teaching.
EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree: speech/theater, Northwestern University; master's degree: library science, Northeastern Illinois University.
FAVORITE MOVIE: Not a film fan. We kissed Comcast goodbye over two years ago. I prefer books. I'm reading a Chicago history right now – "Chicago 101" and I just finished the Wolf Hall Trilogy (A historical saga about the rise and fall of Thomas Cromwell in the court of England's King Henry VIII).
DEEP DISH OR THIN CRUST PIZZA: No preference
KETCHUP OR MUSTARD ON A HOT DOG: Mustard
PEPSI OR PERRIER: Water drinker, from the tap.
FUNNY/INTERESTING THING PEOPLE TYPICALLY DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU: I have been in more Unions than anyone I know.

Continued from page 7



Hunting and trapping remains a part of McHenry County – even to this day. This circa 1955 picture of the Hebron Fox Club features (from left) Glenn Bottlemy, Henry DeHaas, Harold Kingsley, Sam DeYoung, Ernest Fink, Ervin Bottlemy and Edward Berry.

At that time, a tremendous demand for beaver pelts existed because the inner short hairs of a beaver's fur made what was then known as a superior "felt" – perfect for making rain-resistant hats.

Because of the massive desire to obtain beaver skins, trappers in the area trapped the area's beaver population to extinction. Joel Greenberg, in his *Natural History of the Chicago Region*, notes that between 1783 and the early 1820s heavy trapping pressure decimated the population [of beaver] quickly. A list of fur prices offered to trappers at Fort Dearborn in the late 1820s does not mention beaver. That suggests that the species was either already gone or at least extremely rare.

As agricultural development expanded across the county, habitat for fur-bearing animals became increasingly rare. Greenberg says, "Most wolves [with rare exception] were gone from the area by the early 1800s."

Little in the way of fur trapping in McHenry County from the mid 1800s into the 20th century can be found in print literature, with the exception of a business card published in the *Marengo Republican* sometime in 1868 in which Ralph Chapman advertised that he dealt in "ladies' fine furs" and that he wanted "all kinds of furs at highest cash prices."

By the start of the 20th century women were wearing fur capes which were, as advertised in Sears, Roebuck Co. catalogs, made mostly of seal skins. Men's coats were often created out of either seal skin or racoon skins. During the Victorian era, fur stoles became more and more popular. This led to an increase in fox trapping in McHenry County as the Baltic seal population drastically decreased from over hunting. By 1920 as over trapping of foxes in the county led to a scarcity of pelts, some county farmers discovered that they could cash in on the increasingly popular fashion trend by actually raising foxes on their farms for the trade.

One of the first in the Chicago area to see the value of raising foxes for the fur trade was Otto Grosse. Otto, a son of Franz and Louisa Scholl Grosse, was born in Maine Township, Cook County on Oct. 30, 1898. The former truck farmer married Edna Peterson in Maine Township on Feb. 11, 1922, and by 1928 he was operating a fox breeding and pelting (skinning) farm outside of Algonquin.

With the scarcity of horse meat, which was used to feed the foxes, and with furriers clamoring for mink pelts for new styles of coats, Grosse added mink breeding and pelting at his farm. By the mid-1930s, his operation had become so successful that he purchased a large tract of land from John Hertz (of Chicago taxi fame) five miles to the east of Crystal Lake, with a home at 1219 Crystal Lake Road. Grosse trumpeted his success in October 1938 by renting out the Bon-Aire Country Club (now – Foxford Hills Golf Club) and inviting more than 100 guests to watch professional models and Hollywood starlets don furs in a floor show.

Grosse's operation, the Northwood Fur Farm, was gassing and skinning almost 1,000 mink along with innumerable fox during a single winter pelting season.

During World War II, Grosse converted much of his land for raising crops, cattle and hogs for the war effort, while still raising almost exclusively mink. In fact, needing help to run his large operation, he contracted with the federal government to bring in a number of German prisoners of war to work as farm laborers.

In September 1950, a reporter from the *Harvard Herald* noted in a squib about the operation that he saw "almost

Continued on page 9

Continued from page 8

endless rows of low cages stretching through the woods." At the same time, the Crystal Lake Herald reported that the Northwood farm was "the largest fur farm in North America." By the end of that decade, the farm eclipsed more than 1,000 acres. It was said that, at the height of the farm's success, more than 100,000 mink were raised each season. After all, it took up to 70 female or 50 male pelts to construct a single full-length coat.

As Chicago's Union Stockyards hog slaughterhouses were known to "make use of everything but the squeal," Grosse made sure that the mink carcasses did not go to waste, butchering them to be made into pet food.

After Grosse died in November 1962, his heirs sold the farm to the Cudahy Company. That company continued the mink pelt business there even as Cary expanded and resident complaints about odors from the farm increased. The company closed the operation down in 1992 and the land was sold to Town and Country Homes, a land developer.

Otto Grosse and his wife, Edna, who lived until 1981, are buried in Crystal Lake's Memorial Park Cemetery.

Grosse was not the only person who saw McHenry County as a superb place to establish a fur farm. In about 1923, Charles T. Dunning and Frank E. Mueller opened "Silver Fox Fur Farm" in Section 1 of Seneca Township, just to the west of Woodstock. They set up almost 1,000 pens for the foxes – initiated with 50 breeding pairs ordered from Idaho in November 1927. A *Woodstock Sentinel* reporter stated in September 1933 that the fox farm was "one of the largest and most modern silver fox pelt producers in the world." The farm operated into the 1940s when mink fur tended to supplant fox.

Dunning retired in 1947 and died in December 1971 in Genoa City, Wis. He is buried with his wife in Woodstock's Oakland Cemetery.

To the south of Woodstock, Kenneth Connerty operated a mink ranch for a short time, as did Erich Schnittke near Franklinville in Seneca Township.

Louis Novak operated the Orchard Hill Mink Ranch somewhere to the south of Marengo in Riley Township from the 1930s into the 1950s. In an ad placed in the May 1, 1952, edition of the *Marengo Republican* Novak said, "We will buy crippled and down cows and horses for our mink ranch." Novak, described in his obituary as a "well known cattle dealer," died in Marengo April 1, 1950, and is buried in the Marengo City Cemetery with his wife, Frances.

Also, near Marengo, Dan Kennedy ran a fox farm and "rabbitry." The Dec. 29, 1932, edition of the *Marengo Republican* stated that someone had vandalized his property and allowed five pair of silver foxes – valued at $2,600 per pair – to escape.

A number of other mink farms were located beyond the Northwood farm in northeastern McHenry County. One such place, that of Walter Graf, was located along Rawson Bridge Road west of the Fox River. It was called the Graf Mink Ranch. An absentee owner, Graf was listed in the 1940 federal census of Chicago as being the president of a wholesale fur company. He lived in Chicago all of his life, dying there in 1962 only a few years after closing down the farm.

A more long-lasting mink farm was that of Otto F. Buhl who owned a place located just off Illinois Route 176 between Crystal Lake and Burton's Bridge. Starting in 1939, he purchased 30 female and 10 male minks. Within a few years, it is said that he was skinning over 2,000 pelts a year, destined – as noted by a *Crystal Lake Herald* reporter in a February 1953 article – to the "top New York market." He became associated with the New York Auction Co. for which he worked with mink farmers across the American northwest. He closed down his farm in 1953 and moved to the state of Oregon.

The *McHenry Plaindealer* reported in February 1945 that

Continued on page 10

More than 2,000 visitors gathered in July 1949 at Northwoods Mink Farm to preview the 1950 mink fashions and view some of the 20,000 mink Otto Grosse raised on his farm.

Continued from page 9

Matt's Mink Ranch was looking for "dead farm animals" to be used to feed that farm's minks. And a June 1987 report in the *Crystal Lake Herald* noted that Floyd S. Morse, a grandson of a McHenry County pioneer family, had operated a silver fox fur farm on the east side of Country Club Road about one-half mile north of Ridgefield. He was associated with the "Silver Fox Farms of Chicago."

Morse sold the farm in 1937 and died in Ridgefield in 1942. He and his wife are buried in the Ridgefield Cemetery. The article also noted that another such farm existed "in Bull Valley near Woodstock."

Perhaps the last large notable fur farm in McHenry County was that of the "Talidis Mink Barn," located on Franklinville Road just north of Route 176. A Dec. 9, 2020, obituary for Vasilios "Bill" Talidis stated that, as a boy in Greece, he worked in the fur business after his father died. Upon arriving in the United States, he entered the same business in Chicago.

"Bill soon became acquainted with an elderly couple who owned a small fur shop and mink ranch in Union, Illinois. After making garments for their shop, the couple wanted to retire and asked Bill if he would own their business," the obituary stated. Talidis died Nov. 28, 2020, and is buried in the Union Cemetery.

Not only did Talidis raise and "pelt" his minks, he made the decision to attempt to "cut out the middleman" by selling coats and stoles on site. He was very successful in doing such. He became the president of the Illinois Mink Breeders Association. As the wearing of natural furs became less and less popular into the 21st century, Mr. Talidis closed his business in 2006. A small row of abandoned mink pens still stands behind the farm buildings.

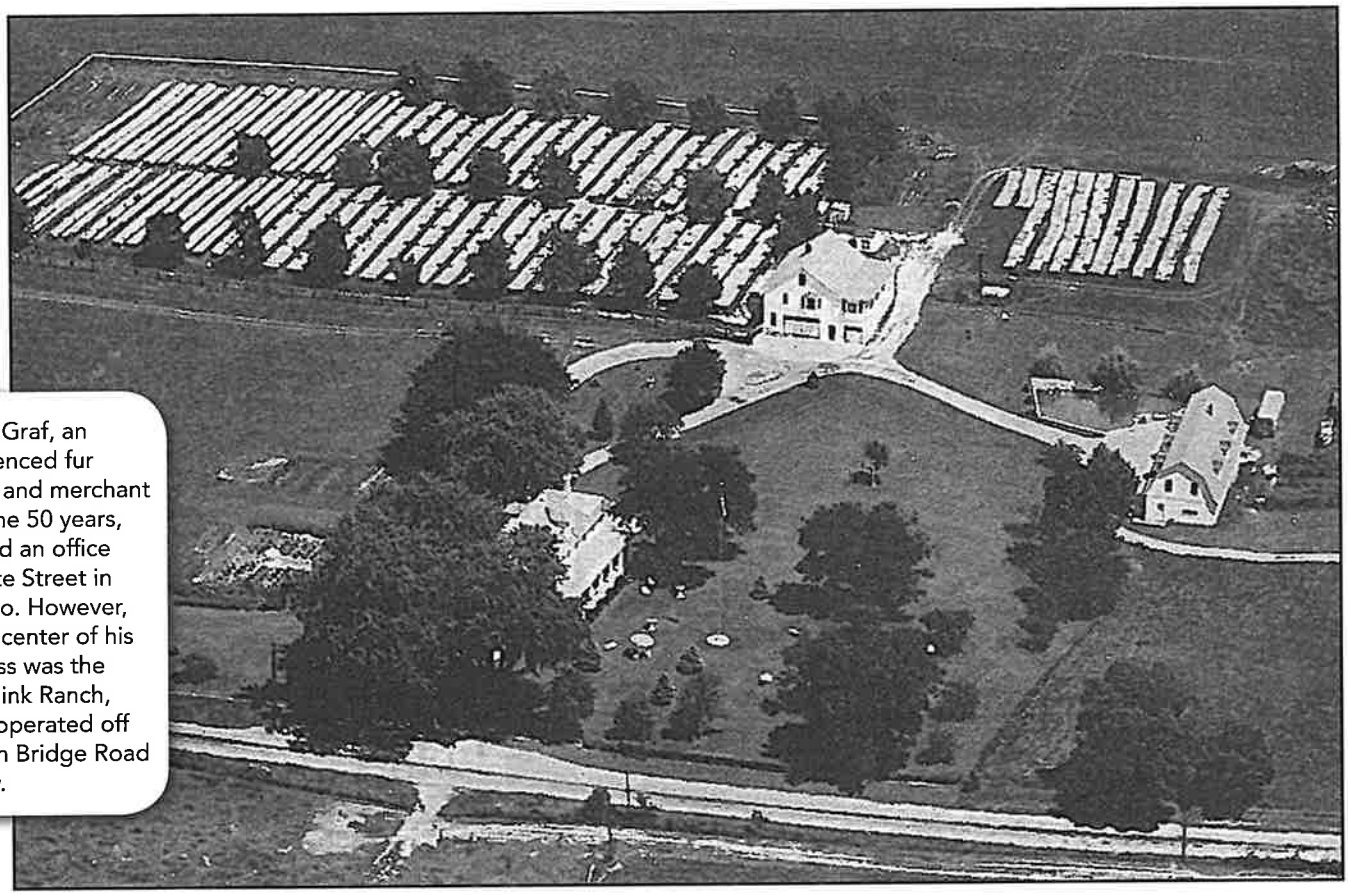
One commercial fur farm continues to exist in McHenry County. The Frye Fur farm, established in 1975 and located east of Crystal Lake near Illinois 176, still produces mink pelts. In early October 1997, vandals associated with animal rights groups cut fences and opened cages at the farm. Almost 5,000 minks were released. While most were found and returned, between 500 and 1,000 were not. Some of the $800,000 loss was incurred when the vandals, defined as domestic terrorists by the FBI, destroyed many mink pedigree breeding records. A single "classic" pedigreed mink pelt could fetch up to $1,000.

According to an independent study commissioned in 2012-13 by International Fur Federation, the global fur industry generated $35.8 billion in sales and employed more than a million people. The Fur Information Council of America touts $1.5 billion in retail sales in the U.S. alone, plus jobs for more than 32,000 full-time workers plus more than 100,000 additional seasonal jobs.

However, the latest statistics from the United States Department of Agriculture note a 15-percent drop in mink pelt production between 2018 and 2019. Wisconsin, the state with largest mink industry, produced 1.02 million pelts.

With the advent of changing fashion interests and artificial "fur" fibers in the late 20th century, the fur trade in McHenry County, once nationally known, mostly came to a close. This author, in his youth, once owned a pair of rabbit-fur-lined gloves. Such are no longer necessary with the advent of manmade fibers designed to ward off the cold.

Besides, fashion is a fickle friend. ◆



Walter Graf, an experienced fur grader and merchant for some 50 years, boasted an office on State Street in Chicago. However, the epicenter of his business was the Graf Mink Ranch, which operated off Rawson Bridge Road in Cary.

Since their origin, H.R. Stewart, Inc. has always been customer focused. H.R. Stewart has built many customer relationships with Cary and surrounding communities. "It's a lot of hard work to keep everything rolling," said Allan Stewart, who retired from the business in 1995. The picture of Jim and Allan was taken on Oct. 31, 2020 when Allan turned 90.

These Scottish roots run deep

H.R. Stewart historically connected to customer service, village of Cary

By KURT BEGALKA

Cary's H.R. Stewart Inc. celebrated 90 years of doing business in 2020, but the family's McHenry County roots are even deeper.

Born in Scotland in 1865, James Stewart immigrated to the United States and married Cora Belle Lowe of Algonquin on April 8, 1890. The couple had seven children. A farmer by trade, James owned the Thunderbird farm at Three Oaks Road and Route 14 before moving into town in 1927. He and Cora Belle, who ran an ice cream parlor and restaurant on Main Street until World War I restricted supplies, lived at 536 Main St.

In 1930, James bought Grebe's Hardware Store – as well as a plumbing and heating business – from L.H. Grebe. One of his four sons, Howard, assumed control of the latter.

The new Stewart Hardware operated at the original 18 Spring St. location until 1939, when it moved to rented space in the Newbold Livery building (52 Crystal St.) on Route 14. In 1944, Howard and William Neilson became partners and launched Stewart and Neilson, Inc.

In 1946, Howard bought land on what had been the old Borden milk factory property at 19 and 27 Jandus Road, moving the hardware store to that location. It remained there until 1952 when Howard sold his hardware business to Frank Snell. At the same time, Howard moved his plumbing and heating business to his home at 124 E. Main St. Equipment was stored in the Zogus family barn on Three Oaks Road.

In 1952 Neilson left the business, which was renamed H.R. Stewart, Inc. This was about the same time Howard's son, Allan, joined the family business – returning home from three years in the Marine Corps. James Stewart died in December 1953 and that same year Howard moved his office into a new building at 15 Jandus Road.

In 1966, the family bought and remodeled the Newbold building and relocated H.R. Stewart Inc. to that location. Howard died two years later, at which time his son, Allan, assumed control. Allan had learned the business from the bottom up – as had his father before him.

"Financially we were not doing enough work," he recalled. "We were financially distressed for a few years but we persevered. You make your own luck."

The company doubled down on customer service. Word-of-mouth testimonials and deep connection to the Cary

Continued on page 12

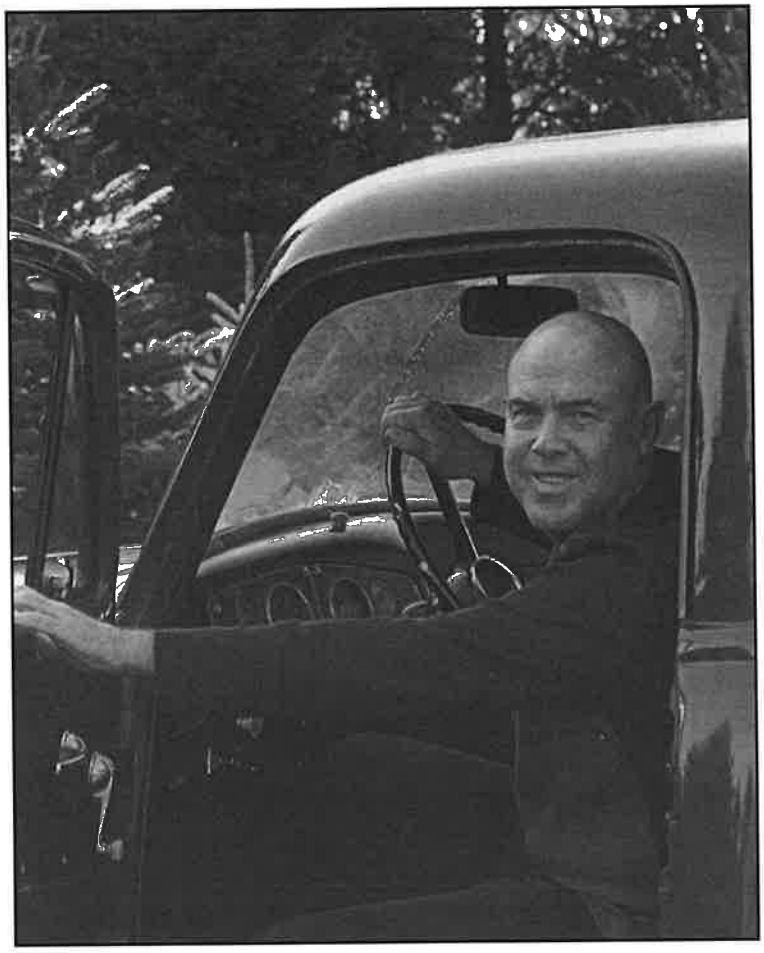
Continued from page 11

"Jim has transformed the business and made a lot of good connections with people he's worked for," Allan Stewart said of his son and current president of H.R. Stewart Inc. in Cary. "You work with a company and then an employee from there moves to a different firm and they say, 'Well we worked with this Stewart outfit and they did a good job for us at the other place. Let's try them out.' It keeps moving along."

community sparked a resurgence in business. Today they sponsor community events such as the Cary Main Street Fest and the Merry Cary parade. Howard Stewart served as the village's 17th president.

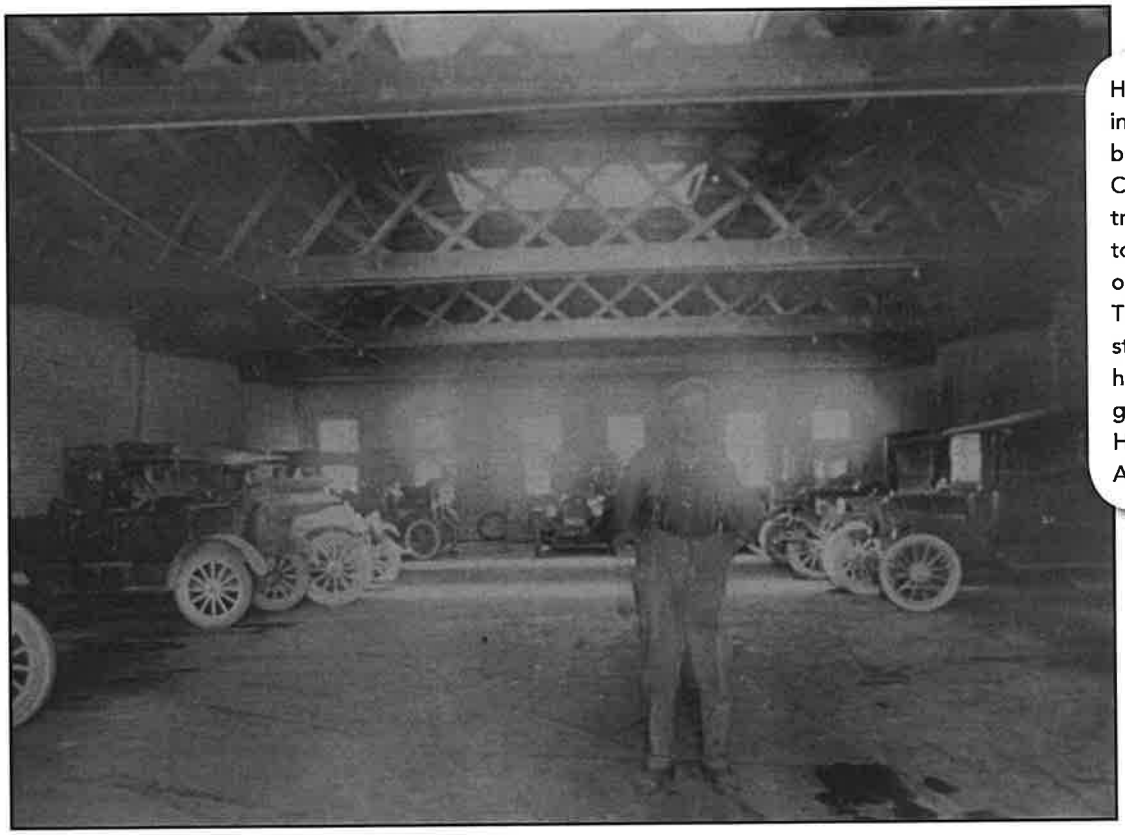
"It's a hugely different business today than it was 20 or 25 years ago," said Allan, 90. "It was strictly a plumbing and heating business, then we added sheet metal. Jim has really expanded on that quite a bit. ... Air conditioning is a big section now, as is plant maintenance."

In 1983 Allan's son, Jim, became the fourth generation to enter the business. He became its president in 2000 and quickly expanded H.R. Stewart's repertoire to meet customers' expectations. Now age 55, Jim went from digging ditches while still in high school to now digging his teeth into a smorgasbord of services that include a custom sheet metal fabrication facility, a residential and municipal divisions, and a government sewer cleaning and televising division.



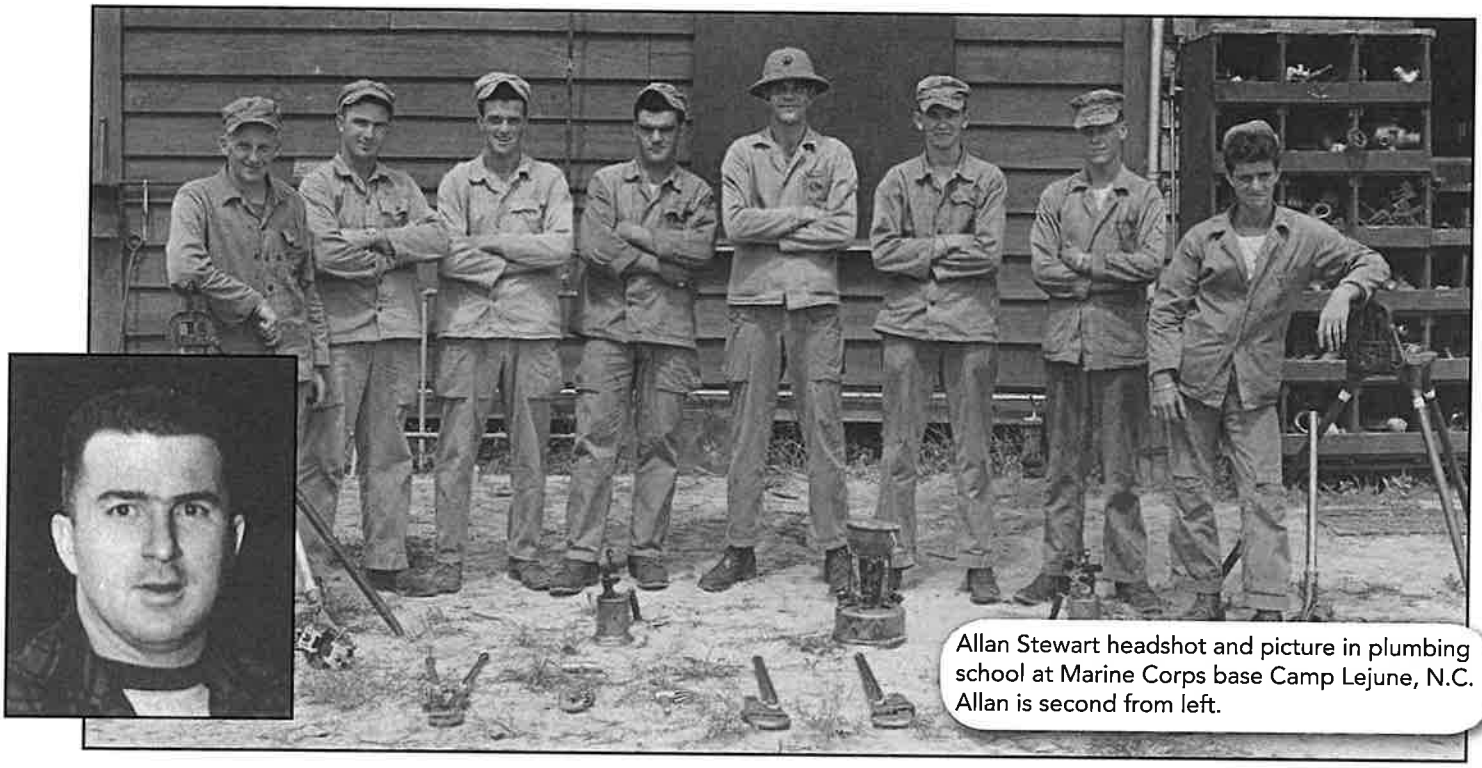
"There's a lot of technology," Jim said. "We're managing 50 locations remotely. And we've had to learn about new technologies for air cleaning."

Continued on page 13



Howard R. Stewart is pictured inside the Newbold Livery building at 52 Crystal St. in Cary. Many livery stables transitioned from horse power to horsepower and the livery operated by Henry Newbold. The livery building, which once stored carriages and boarded horses, became a automobile garage and then the home of H.R. Stewart. Notice the Model A's in the background.

Continued from page 12



Allan Stewart headshot and picture in plumbing school at Marine Corps base Camp Lejune, N.C. Allan is second from left.

COVID has managing the later, while keeping its staff of 30 safe, particularly challenging. Allan recalled working on coal-fired furnaces, then oil and now those powered by natural gas. He recalled massive plumbing projects along the tollway and at Rockford hospitals.

"We traveled from Chicago to Beloit (Wis.) and east to Milwaukee," Allan said. "Back then you had to figure the job and go to where it was."

That remains the prevailing attitude.

"I'm a hands-on guy," Jim said. "I love the customer service and I love being the guy who solves people's problems." ◆

Help shape the past's future, join the MCHS Board of Directors

The McHenry County Historical Society & Museum is seeking historically minded individuals interested in shaping the future direction of the society by serving as board members. The commitment to our mission of "providing the methods and means of presenting McHenry County history to enrich life" is key to the society's continued success.

The McHenry County Historical Society & Museum is seeking historically minded individuals interested in shaping the future direction of the society by serving as board members. A commitment to our mission – to engage and educate current and future generations by preserving and sharing McHenry County history – is key.

Serving on the board or volunteering on a committee should be a good fit if you have…

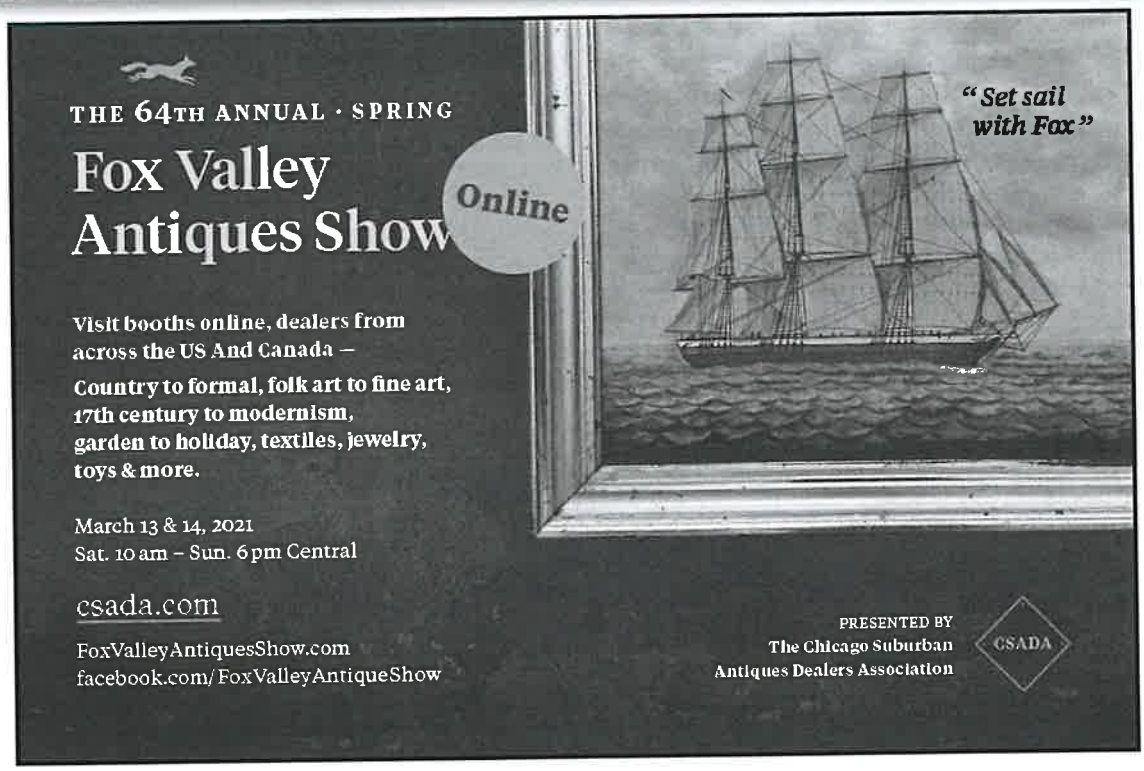
- a passion for history in your life (travels, reading, interests)
- your own collection(s)
- experience serving on other boards
- attended activities and events sponsored by the Society
- volunteered at the Society
- taught school, given a presentation, or otherwise conveyed information to a group
- participated in any advocacy project (social, government, political, religious)
- contributed financially, other than your membership, to the Society in the past
- ideas, talents, expertise you wish to share in order to convey history and enrich lives
- two to six hours a month to devote to board activities

Everyone brings their own valuable skill set to the table, however MCHS is especially looking for folks with a background in finance or the building trades – as well as a dedicated public servant from the county's growing Latinx community. Prospective candidates must live or work in McHenry County.

If you would like to learn more or know of a person you believe would embrace this important role, contact Governance Committee Chairwoman Molly Walsh at mollyw08@yahoo.com. New three-year terms begin July 1. The museum is located at 6422 Main St. in Union.

New at the Library...

- *Our Stamm Family History – As I Know It*, by Arlyn (Sherwood) Booth. Sept. 18, 2020.
- *Our Ellithorpe Family History – As I Know It*, by Arlyn (Sherwood) Booth, June 1, 2020.
- *Our Sherwood Family History – As I Know It*, by Arlyn (Sherwood) Booth, June 1, 2020.
- *The Gallant 15th of Illinois: History of a Civil War Volunteer Infantry Regiment*, by Betty Obendorf and Kathy Pasch. Polo Historical Society, Polo, IL, circa 2015.
- Marengo Community High School yearbook: Face Face, 2001.
- Marian Central Catholic High School yearbook: Memorare, 2001.
- *Forty-Nine Years of Crystal Lake History As We Have Lived*, by Edna C. McCall, 2012.
- *Montelona Farm: The Story of Pioneer William A. McConnell's Homestead in Richmond*, by Rommy Lopat and Michelle Bray Wilson. Circa 2018, 2019.
- *The Defenseless Child*, by Josie Dayton Curtiss, Brethem Publishing House, Elgin, Ill., 1912.
- *Lest We Forget* by George F. Colver.
- *Our Wedding Bells:* George F. Colver and Ruby L. Carpenter.
- Metropolitan Group Insurance Co. personnel file, 1974. Hazel Lang.
- *McHenry County Courts Conservation Bond Ledger*, 1897-1913.
- American Legion Crystal Lake Post 171 newsletters : September 1987, July-August 1990, October-December 1990, January-December 1991, January 1992.
- *Our Kolbenschlag Family History – As I Know It*, by Arlyn (Sherwood) Booth. Sept. 18, 2020.
- *Coming to America to the Pioneer Life*, probable author Clara Tera Buck Bay, circa 1910.
- *Museum Musings* column from the Woodstock Independent, Dec. 7, 1994, to Oct. 15, 1997.
- Hi-Lites, 1995: 50th anniversary of Woodstock Community High School and St. Mary School, Woodstock.
- Singer Sewing Library, circa 1930-34. Four volumes: *Short Cuts to Home Sewing, How to Make Dresses, How to Make Children's Clothes, and How to Make Draperies, Slip Covers & Other Home Furnishings.*
- *Our Meinert Family History – As I Know It*, Arlyn (Sherwood) Booth. Sept. 18, 2020
- *Our Kreft Family History – As I Know It*, by Arlyn (Sherwood) Booth, Sept. 18, 2020.
- *Research in the Land Entry File of the General Land Office.* Compiled by Kenneth Hawkins, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., 2009.
- *Using Civilian Records for Genealogic Research in the National Archives*, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., 2009.
- *Veterans Buried in McHenry County Cemeterys [sic] and Other Places After Jan. 1, 1971. 2020.*
- *Holy Bible* presented to the Methodist church in Franklinville by Mrs. Mary Sanford.
- *Scrapbook of Lt. Edith Stewart*, assembled by her sister, Jessie Stewart Barber. Edith (Stewart) Nimsgern was an Army nurse in 1944.


THE 64TH ANNUAL · SPRING
Fox Valley Antiques Show
Online
"Set sail with Fox"
Visit booths online, dealers from across the US And Canada –
Country to formal, folk art to fine art, 17th century to modernism, garden to holiday, textiles, jewelry, toys & more.
March 13 & 14, 2021
Sat. 10 am – Sun. 6 pm Central
csada.com
FoxValleyAntiquesShow.com
facebook.com/FoxValleyAntiqueShow
PRESENTED BY
The Chicago Suburban Antiques Dealers Association
CSADA

Old Mystery Photo

The factory in the background is the Collins & Burgie Stove Works, also known as the Marengo Stove Works. It was built in 1898 and stretched more than two blocks along East Street before it burned in October 1907. Look closely at this postcard and you'll notice some windows are broken or boarded up ... reminders of the fire the previous year.

The area today is the Zion Lutheran Church athletic fields, formerly Shurtleff Flats – home to the Marengo Whiteys and the Marengo Athletics (pictured). The Marengo Republican-News proclaimed this Aug. 28, 1908, match to be the "greatest base ball day in Marengo."

Capt. Adrain C. Anson's Colts of Chicago (Anson had played 11 seasons for the Chicago White Stockings) proved a huge attraction, "depopulating" communities from Garden Prairie south to Huntley. The paper reported that banks and businesses closed from 2:30 to 5 p.m. that day "so that no one may be deprived of the privilege of enjoying the event."

The Athletics defeated the Colts, 5-4.

New Mystery Photo

This circa 1960s aerial photo shows a newly developed public space. What is it and in which community is it located?

Tracer:

Quarterly Newsletter of the
McHenry County Historical Society

Not-For-Profit
Corporation
U.S. Postage
PAID
Marengo, IL 60152
Permit No. 9

An Illinois Not-for-profit Corporation
6422 Main Street, P.O. Box 434, Union, Illinois 60180
815-923-2267 Email: info@mchenrycountyhistory.org